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OPINION-EDITORIAL

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A new approach is needed on Box Canyon Dam re-licensing

By U.S. Rep. George Nethercutt

People depend on their local power company. But imagine the federal government was trying to impose conditions that would triple your power rates and cost you your job. How would you react? Probably not favorably.

Sadly, this is the situation facing residents of Pend Oreille County. The Spokesman-Review ran a story last week about my work to resolve this situation, but its focus was on incendiary rhetoric and missed the essence of what is at stake for the people of Pend Oreille County – and what the plausible remedies to this situation might be.

All of the 14,000 residents and local businesses of the county rely on the Public Utility District for power. The PUD provides power to homes and businesses by operating the Box Canyon Dam, one of many hydroelectric dams in the state, which combined produce nearly 90 percent of our electricity. Hydropower is one of the most reliable, least expensive and cleanest energy sources we have. The cost of the power produced at the dam is spread out among all ratepayers. In this case, the largest ratepayer in the county also is the largest employer.

The PUD has applied to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to renew its license to operate Box Canyon Dam. The PUD's application is under scrutiny by federal and state officials who have a long wish-list of improvements they want to impose as a condition of renewing the dam's license. This situation isn't uncommon. Federal bureaucrats have seized upon the the re-licensing process as an opportunity to push their expensive, and sometimes unnecessary, top-down management plans on dams across the country. One of the proposed recommendations to improve the environment around Box Canyon Dam includes a 50-mile **paved** bike path.

The estimated cost of the federal government's wish list adds up to \$500 million. To meet this demand, the Public Utility District would either need to dramatically raise electric rates on its citizens, or go outside the county to buy its energy on the unsteady national electricity markets, where rates wildly fluctuate.

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Dramatically increased electricity rates would have a catastrophic effect on Pend Oreille County. The 14,000 people of this little county already face a double-digit unemployment rate and difficult challenges in attracting new jobs to the region. Losing an affordable, stable power supply would make it even harder to attract new jobs to the region. To make matters worse, imposing these conditions on the dam would likely cause Ponderay Newsprint, the largest job-provider in the county, to close its doors, leaving 200 workers and their families out in the cold.

Many Pend Oreille County residents have asked me to intercede on their behalf to get the federal government to rethink its devastating proposal. I have attempted to be a bridge between the stakeholders in this case. There are the two points that are central to moving toward a solution:

This process should produce environmental and recreational benefits without threatening the project's economic viability. So far, the federal and state bureaucrats who created the \$500 million list of re-licensing conditions are standing by their recommendations. Destroying already depressed communities just to fulfill government-imposed conditions that are counter-productive and will not produce any significant environmental results is not acceptable, nor reasonable.

There can be no doubt that one of Pend Oreille County's greatest assets is its scenic beauty and recreational opportunities. The PUD is committed to the county's economic development strategy of increasing tourism, and is willing to create environmental benefits as part of the government re-licensing process. In fact, the PUD has included a host of environmental improvement and recreational benefits in its re-licensing application filed with the federal government.

Listening and responding to the concerns of the Kalispel Tribe of Indians is an integral part of this process. I recently met with members of the tribe to discuss my concerns with this process. My hope is that the tribe and the PUD can work together on a plan that will benefit the utility, the tribe, local ratepayers, local businesses, and the environment. Despite the inaccurate, but headline-producing, charges leveled against me by the tribe's Seattle lawyer, I will continue to reach out to the tribe in hopes that a positive settlement on the issues they care deeply about can be reached.

Going forward, it's critical that all involved with the re-licensing effort keep themselves focused on what's best for the local community – not what's best for state and federal bureaucrats who view Box Canyon as a money source for ideas that are unrelated to the dam's critical purpose, which is the production of low-cost energy for the residents of Pend Oreille County.

There has to be a better way to resolve our disagreements over the re-licensing of the Box Canyon Dam than through endless, expensive litigation and conflict. Our goal should be to come up with Box Canyon re-licensing requirements that meet the needs of all the residents of Pend Oreille County, including the Kalispel. The current process, which focuses on the narrow agendas of federal agencies, will certainly not achieve this goal.

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